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Beyond Feng Shui: What we can borrow from Chinese landscape design

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Think far east and designed landscapes and what comes to mind? Japanese gardens. Even the dwarfed ornamental trees grown in shallow containers are known by the Japanese name bonsai, despite originating in China.

The recent Feng Shui fad notwithstanding, China probably isn't top of mind when it comes to things green, beautiful and design forward, but that is about to change. After spending a year in China working as a landscape architect in a Chinese-owned multidisciplinary design firm, I can emphatically say that some of the most exciting work in landscape architecture is being done in the middle kingdom.

Authentic Chinese garden design was virtually unseen in the west until the "opening up" of China two-plus decades ago. And what has arrived has often showcased greater design freedom than what we have in the west. The spectacular opening gambit for the Beijing Olympics made one thing clear: with a 5,000-year springboard, you can leap pretty high and land in a whole new place. China has finally arrived and there are some significant landscape architectural ideas and practices we'd be wise to borrow.

* Design with nature. While American landscape architecture in recent years has taken its cues from nature, Chinese gardens were the first to look inward for inspiration. Artfully designed water features with carefully placed stones and plants were Chinese long before they were Japanese. Going to the source is instructive and refreshing.

* Plant other art forms. In traditional Chinese garden design, window and gateway openings are aligned to frame views composed like 3-D paintings. On white garden walls, the shadows of leaves and branches read like ink brush paintings. Actual paintings adorn garden shelters and covered garden walkways.

* Embrace technology. Harnessing the latest technology to add imagery and interactivity to public places enriches the public realm, providing Vegas exuberance. Nature and technology can be wonderfully complementary. The edge of famed West Lake in Hangzhou, the city that wowed Marco Polo, boasts an exuberant syncopated fountain and light show with musical intonations.

* Less is more of a bore. Over-the-top is better than understated (apologies to fans of N.E. austerity.) Like traditional Chinese gardens, modern Chinese parks offer jam-packed immersion, with artful forms underfoot and on all sides, and invite activity by groups large and larger. The northeast seacoast city of Dalian is awash in imaginative public spaces that come alive with public art, like transparent statues of athletes dancing or a 50-foot tall globe whose surface is a seamless LED screen.

* Add meaning and lots of allusions. Incorporating widely shared cultural symbolism and locally understood historical references in the design of parks and open spaces enhances life for residents

and visitors alike. My favorite is a small hillside park overlooking the ancient tiled rooftops of Lijiang, not far from Tibet. There, paving of white and gray river stones create traditional motifs like the yin-yang circle and lotus blossoms. The walls are painted with 2,300 auspicious motifs for the 23 local minorities and the roof of the Wangu Tower boasts thirteen angles to symbolize the thirteen peaks of nearby Jade Dragon Mountain.

* Borrow the Landscape. "The Chinese were the first to use design to link foreground, which you own, to the scenic background, which you don't, by screening the messy world that lies in between. This began in the garden center of Suzhou, where the Garden of the Humble Administrator "borrowed" the view of the famous nine-layered North Pagoda across town.

Chinese landscape architecture today is vibrant, bold, ambitious, and increasingly sensitive to sustainability. For example, it's now national law to irrigate with "gray" water - nondrinkable water used for things like washing. That's something I'd like to see here in the U.S. China is reinventing the landscape for a modern, active enjoyment of life in a way that is very new and exciting in the post-Mao pro-prosperity era.

We American landscape architects have a lot to learn from looking to the east. Conservatism does not suit the times, at least not in places that believe in a brighter future. My post-China philosophy is: Take risks with design. "Be bold. Be free." "Imagine anything. Then do it."

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